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SUBJECT: DARFUR: GOV DIVIDED ON COMMANDERS CONFERENCE

REF: KHARTOUM 0068

11. (SBU) Two Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) fighter planes overflew El Fasher on January 15. Several Darfur Peace Agreement non-signatory commanders, who were planning to attend a commanders conference in North Darfur in the coming days, have characterized the flyover as an attempt by the Sudanese government to intimidate them. On January 16, the UN reported that government Anotovs conducted a bombing raid in North Darfur, targeting Anka, Birdik, and Um Rai - a potential site for the conference. There were no human casualties reported, but some livestock was killed.

12. (SBU) According to the UN Acting Head of Security in El Fasher, some rebel commanders began to move overland toward the potential conference site on January 18, and an EU observer to the Cease-fire Commission (CFC) reported that the African Union (AU) had begun planning to transport other commanders from pre-determined pick-up locations. The AU air operation was not launched, however, because the Western Region Command of the Sudanese Armed Forces denied flight clearance, saying it had not been informed of the security guarantees issued by Khartoum on January 15 (reftel). The AU Acting Head of Mission in Khartoum contacted Maghzoub al-Khalifa, the government's point person for the commanders conference, to request that clarification be issued to Sudanese military commanders in the field. According to an EU staff officer, the AU Acting Head of Mission was told that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and al-Khalifa supported the conference but that Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Mohammed Hussein opposed it and was out of the country. The AU air mission requires eight hours of planning. Pending clarification of the government position, the earliest movement would be January 21.

13. (SBU) The January 16 CFC meeting addressed the overflight of El Fasher, and the Sudanese government representative denied that any aircraft had moved "in Darfur or Chad in the past two days." At a UN Mission to Sudan (UNMIS) briefing on January 18, a UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) representative said that the Sudanese Government had said the aircraft were looking for missing vehicles. UNMIS also reported that the Government was transporting military personnel into the region through the El Fasher airport and then transferring them in the direction of El Geneina. (Note: Humanitarian organizations in El Geneina reported similar flyovers on January 16. End note.)

14. (SBU) Comment: The SAF overflight and bombing of Um Rai indicate a fissure within the Sudanese Government on the conference of non-signatory commanders. Regardless of the Government's moves, the rebels seem unphased and continue to express a desire to meet in the near future. End comment.

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